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ABSTRACT

To point out potential subjects for research into theatre directing, this paper presents an outline of numerous factors relating to the personal qualities and the craft of theatre directors. The factors are listed under the following headings: (1) the director as an individual--career preparation and personal style: (2) directorial processes in planning productions--script preparation and development of a production plan: and (3) directorial methods in rehearsal and performance--production organization, work with actors, rehearsal planning, creation of an impression structure, and unification of the work. (GT)

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DRAFT

FRAMEWORK FOR RESEARCH

Into the Work of the Director in the Theatre

The following outline proposes an organization of the potential subjects for comprehensive study of the profession and craft of the theatre director. This framework identifies the major concerns for research into theatre directing as a field of study. That is, the intention is to encompass the entire field; any important subject in this field may, then, be presumed to have its place in the framework.

In certain ways the framework resembles a taxonomy, in that it bears analogies to the hierarchies of genera and species in biology. In other ways it can be compared to chemistry's periodic table of elements, since a great deal is known about some of the subjects while little is known about the others. Actually, however, theatre directing is a field of peculiar characteristics and may not be reduced to as systematic an array of topics as those models from the sciences display. Indeed, many would hold that a scheme of this kind is not practicable, due to the peculiarities of the field. The contention here is that framework is highly useful as a guide to a researcher seeking to examine practice in the field. At any rate, the profession of the director in the theatre has been recognized for more than a hundred years and yet very little has been done to organize study of the field. This is at least a start.

The first portion of the framework deals with the background which the director brings to his/her work. The outline next considers directorial activity in a process sequence, from the study of a script to the completion of staging for an audience. Hopefully, the framework will stimulate the invention of research methods to investigate its topics empirically, with a view to the development of hypotheses for testing and to the collection of data through observation and study of existing materials. Since reports that have been done in this field have been irregular and frequently rely on anecdotal evidence, some headings in the framework may not be familiar as terms; if the annotations make the purpose clear, the student should cast more suitable terms to meet his/her needs and understanding.

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FRAMEWORK

FOR RESEARCH ON THE THEATRE DIRECTOR

I. The Director as an Individual

Collection of data and observations that directly or indirectly bear upon the development of the person who becomes a theatre director.

A. CAREER PREPARATION

1. Aesthetic Environments: circumstances and events unrelated to theatre which have provoked important responses or sensitized perceptions. Also, early exposures to theatre events.

2. Formal Education: the nature and extent of intellectual regimens on the director, whether beneficial or aversive. The director's general reaction to organized learning systems.

3. Informal Education: valued learning experiences of all kinds entered voluntarily by the subject outside schools; e.g., self-originated projects, remarkable people encountered.

4. Theatre Training: specific theatre schooling undergone after age 15, if any, and the significance of this training to the subject

5. Formative Experiences of the Theatre Artist: impactful events and persons in the theatre after completion of education and training; e.g., successes and failures, connections with other arts, literature, and the media.

6. Major Accomplishments of the Mature Artist: The effect of the subject's own achievements on his/her subsequent development, especially patterns of achievement.

B. PERSONAL STYLE

Directing Colloquiums I, II, and III (In Dallas, '73 to '75) identified this factor as of paramount importance in distinguishing the work of front-rank directors from each other. Also termed "charisma" and "leadership quality." Work assumption: the artist is an individualist of a unique sort. Consequent issue: determination of the crucial components which cause others to follow the subject. This domain is difficult to explore, but it is of overreaching significance. Disinterested observation under the following headings may be useful.

1. Personality: the subject's personal traits and attitudes placed within continua, thus -- amiable/cold, aggressive/recessive, outgoing/withdrawn, controlling/permissive. Changes in personal tone in progressive phases of show preparation.

2. Sensibility: unconsidered as well as cultivated tastes and preferences. Responses to sensuous qualities as well as to form and content. Degree of confident reliance on intuition in making judgments.

3. Drive: nature and kind of energy displayed at different points, how well sustained. Impatience/patience continuum with regard to achievements and determination to realize conceptions.

II. Directorial Processes in Planning Productions

Beginning at this point in the Framework, the intent is to bring as much objectivity as possible to the scrutiny of directorial practice. The work of a director, or of any group of directors, is to be viewed as the choices of a craftsman who selects options from among many alternatives.

Under this heading our interest lies in which of the potential means of production planning a subject functions, and to what extent these means are explored. For suggestive guidance see M. Beardsley, "On the Creation of Art," JAAC 23, pp. 291-304; also found in Aesthetics and the Arts, ed. Lee Jacobus.

A. SCRIPT PREPARATION

The director's work with the playscript prior to rehearsals. The topics cited are derived from testimony of experienced directors, presumably cover all likely practices.

1. Accumulation of Perceptions: initial work with the script emphasizes getting to know the material and funding impressions of it. Identify the means employed. Common assumption: the artist opens self to multiple impressions, then enters a gestation period in which cognitive and conative sorting occurs.

2. Methods of Analysis: commonly termed "script study," denoting a more careful examination of the material after first impressions have been formed.

   a. Intuitive: re-readings or contemplation of the script, with a purpose of discovering subjective "connection," solving problems, finding images. This means usually recurs, i.e., during rehearsals.

   b. Inductive: a deliberate moment-by-moment study of the script, arriving at decisions for "beats" or "phrases," and considering "subtext."

   c. Deductive: thorough study of the script in terms of norms accepted for genres, characters, species of action and climax.

3. Practical Research: studies related to production of the script.

   a. Playwright: placing the work to be done in the context of other works by the dramatist.

   b. Collaboration with the Playwright: in the case of a living dramatist, conferences to determine intentions precisely.

   c. Scriptwork: dealing with problems of period, special effects, background of situations and environments depicted.

   d. Historical Context: general issues of an era in which the dramatist placed the action.

e. Ideological Context: investigation of views, social or political, impinging on the work.

4. Interpretative Conclusions: Summary of preceding readings and research.

B. DEVELOPMENT OF A PRODUCTION PLAN (mise en scene)

Directorial artists employ many devices and approaches to prepare themselves for making commitments about the look, the tone, and the meaning of a production. The items given below comprehend the variety of means that assist in this imaginative construction.

1. Visualization: imagining or sensing how the script's qualities and ideas would appear if embodied physically in one or more ways. Most theatre directors visualize, it appears from their own statements. Two kinds of visualization may be described, which is not to assert that a director will employ both if he/she employs one of them.

   a. Primary Visualization: contemplation of the script as aesthetic material possessing key attributes and essences. A search for images, textures, and emotive properties which express (perhaps abstractly) script intentions. Analogous to "primary process thinking" of Freudian psychology.

   b. Secondary Visualization: conscious selection of factors needed in an ideal embodiment of the work to be staged, and/or imaginative testing of these selections through envisioning them in performance. Analogous to "secondary process thinking."

2. Hierarchy of Production Values: setting priorities among production components, according to which of them are most important and need most protection from subsequent compromises.

   a. Personnel: identification of persons whose talents are deemed essential in bringing off the production, e.g., certain actors, designers.

   b. Interpretive: specification of paramount conceptual parameters for production, e.g., recognition of uppermost significance to ideological themes, faithfulness to text, etc.

3. Adaptation to Performance Conditions: consideration of actual, practical matters at the site(s) of production and performance.

   a. Assessment of Stage and Auditorium: check of acoustical properties, backstage equipment, sightlines, etc. to determine if adjustments need to be made in production plan.

   b. Anticipated Audience: scouting probable responses to script, in terms of sophistication levels, regional peculiarities, etc., to weigh shifts of emphasis/pace of performance.

4. Conception of mise en scene: collaboration with the production team (producer, designers, etc.) to originate details of budget, scenery, costumes, lighting, etc.

a. Production Conferences: integration of the work of designers through individual and group meetings, in accordance with interpretive approach selected. Approval of results finally achieved.

b. Extrapolation: foreseeing the outcomes of plans made in relation to attributes of principal players and the combination of players and mise en scene. Alteration of plans projected as inappropriate or ineffective, unfeasible or problematic.

III. Directorial Methods in Rehearsal and Performance

In executing the plan of production, the director functions as an administrator as well as the creative artist most responsible for the impact of the script in production. While some directors prefer to operate in a tested pattern, many directors prefer to remain flexible in dealing with the production in its successive phases of preparation.

A. PRODUCTION ORGANIZATION

Division of responsibilities among production team and staff with a view to how much authority is delegated to whom, establishment of liaisons, clarification of areas over which director will maintain close supervision.

1. Terms of Work: rules and expectations of the organization's members/employees, deadlines and goals, lines of authority.

2. Methods of Supervision: evaluation of progress and projection of accomplishments, routes of communication, ascertainment of harmonious relations in production company/employees.

3. Personnel Selection: announcement of workers sought, screening of applicants, making and acceptance of contracts.

   a. Casting: alternative procedures in auditions and interviews of actors.

   b. Special Terms: refinement of job descriptions in support staff as the company assembled, production underway.

4. Money Matters: limits of budget, liaison with management, bases for bargaining.

B. WORK WITH ACTORS

A multi-dimensioned, sensitive aspect of theatre over which the director exercises direct authority and which presents many valid alternatives. See Personal Style above.

1. Director-Actor Communication: modes of persuasion in verbal/nonverbal exchanges, within and outside of formal rehearsal. A balance struck between artistic leadership by the director and creative use of self in a role(s) by the actor.

2. Rehearsal Methods: setting aside the manner in which rehearsals are conducted (Personal Style), six discrete methods of managing rehearsals may be described.

a. Discussion: conferences with individuals or groups lead to agreements on interpretation, specific actions, shape of performance.

b. Instruction: detailed directions for staging and characterization given to actors from the director's comprehensive plan of scene.

c. Coaching: careful, intimate treatment of scenes and behavior of actors as characters, typified by shared reasoning and perception.

d. Criticism: insightful comments by director guide actor toward fuller realization of script potential, use of space and time.

e. Experiment: director invents games, improvisations, field trips and the like which attune players to the dramatic material and to each other as collaborators.

f. Problem-Solving: impedance of progress prompts director to diagnose problem and apply remedial counter-measures.

C. REHEARSAL PLAN

Consensus seems rare among directors in relation to the plan for rehearsals. Where agreements exist, they appear with regard to the preparation of given genres, e.g., musical comedy, and with regard to insufficient allowance of time to rehearse. It is fair to infer from the practice of leading directorial artists, however, that the general purpose of rehearsals is to train and to gradually condition a company for a sequence of relaxed, disciplined performances. The issues in rehearsal planning may be examined under two headings.

1. Productive Patterns: The experience of the director and his/her knowledge of others' practices lends authority to the use of patterns proved through previous testing. Frequent variations on these patterns are made; e.g., the reading-staging-run-through pattern has been made to work in many ways. Beyond observing the productive pattern rule of thumb, however, we cannot recognize a "model" rehearsal pattern, even for specific genres, until extensive data on directorial practice has been assembled.

2. Rehearsal Objectives: An alternative way to consider the problem of the rehearsal plan is to think in terms of directorial objectives, both in relation to particular calls and in relation to the entire time allowed for preparation. From the practice of leading artists, again, it is feasible to infer that the material needing the most time for development will receive the greatest attention in an efficient plan. The director's analysis of the material to be rehearsed in terms of such objectives therefore assumes shrewd extrapolation (See II-B-4b above).

D. CREATION OF AN IMPRESSION STRUCTURE

Theory in the dramatic and other performing arts has, until recently, has given little attention to performance as a temporal

structure. (See J. Barry, Dramatic Structure for an exception.) Yet objectively speaking, whatever else may be said about performance it is the building and funding of an impression structure in time. Minute and large temporal segments of this structure require thoughtful attention as, in the theatre, the director superintends the shaping of impressions to produce the desired results. It is perhaps the most challenging creative task of the director.

1. Performance Phrases: Stanislavski originated the notion that a performance in the theatre consists of a progression of interrelated units of action ("beats") analogous to the phrases in a piece of music or in a poem. He taught actors and directors to divide their scripts into such phrases either before or during rehearsal -- a practice widely accepted in the American theatre. The director superintends the execution of this formulation. The issue is: how does the director do it?

   a. Intentions -- in current American stage parlance, the equivalent of the Stanislavskian objective. The intentions implied are those of a character, of the dramatist, of the play's "idea" or "theme." Frankly, at times the intentions are those of the director who is trying to make a small (or large) part of a script theatrically viable.

   b. Textual Integrity: the director's appeal is to the script itself as an admirable piece of craftsmanship for the theatre. A search for stage directions behind the lines, and an acceptance of the language and stylistics (punctuation, imagery, diction) as indicators of what the performance must become.

   c. Subtextual Exploration: inquiry -- via conversation with actors or exercises meant to induce a receptive state of mind -- into the inner significance of a script's theatrical statements, The purpose of the approach seems to be to help the actor(s) identify with the play's thematic import or with its environment or with characters as conceived.

   d. Overt Conditioning: whereas most of a director's work with actors is suggestive (esp. when given professional actors), it can effectively expose the player(s) to stimuli which, when understood or accepted by the player(s), will lead to a more expressive performance. E.g., field trips, listening to music of analogous rhythms, etc.

   e. Playwright Clarifications: when the playwright is a collaborator on the production, seeking his/her assistance with details that puzzle, confuse, or otherwise impede interpretation.

2. Scene Function and Design: as phrases combine to make scenes (and scenes combine to make acts), the larger segments of a drama have a shape, pacing, accumulating impact which, if found, makes them "work." The director's resources in achieving this desideratum may include one of the following.

   a. Prototypes: "classic" examples in dramatic literature of superb theatrical craft taken as models. The director

develops scenes of confrontation, duping, mistaken identity, romantic tryst, etc. after such models.

b. Temporal Dynamics: the pacing and mood of the scene perceived as holding the key to its playability. Experiment with tempos or commitment to a build pattern, etc. adopted as the best avenue to giving impact for the segment.

c. Visual Messages: conveying the import of a scene primarily through the design of the stage picture, including the arrangement of the actors and their positions in relation to each other. We might term it "dramatic choreography" in homage to Max Reinhardt.

d. Acoustical Keys: achieving a certain vocal energy, balancing all the auditory elements emanating from the stage may be necessary to bring a scene to vivid life. Emphasis on this aspect may of course include the clarity of projection on the part of actors (difficult to gauge until in the playhouse of performance).

e. Thematic Climax: concentration on the progression of thought -- Aristotle's dianoia -- may yield the secret of effective performance. Observation: masterful dramaturgy seldom follows a straight line of development, but dodges and even digresses as it approaches resolution; i.e., it creates "suspense," in the vulgate.

C. UNIFICATION OF THE WORK

The final task of the director is to see that the production and performance comprise a gestalt, in which everything belongs and contributes. This entails dealing with the largest segments of the work -- finding how they flow together, eliminating elements that disturb that flow, and creating a sense of logic and completeness. Often such a result eludes definition until some audiences witness it and help perception; hence, "previews." The director tests progress by several means.

a. Environmental Coherence: all components of the physical production blend harmoniously and the players operate within that scenic environment easily, accepting it and thinking in its terms. Sometimes known as "style."

b. Articulation of Form: adjusting the emphases, timing, and energies of the performers to gain a satisfying sense of right proportion. An inherent structure appears when crucial relationships seem organically justified. (From the dictionary: "articulation . . . a joining together or being jointed together . . . the method or manner of jointing.")

c. Residual Impact: the interplay between performance and audience provokes accumulating, contagious feelings and thoughts in the playhouse that lead finally to a sense of completion. It is sense that the audience takes away from the theatre. Cf. B. Beckerman's "empathic parallelism" in Dynamics of Drama.

d. Aesthetic Quality: a pervasive ambience informs and surrounds the performance and the play, in such fasion that faults seem minor (if perceived at all) in comparison to the unique expressiveness of the whole work. "A.Q." generates that feature of spectator response which theorists term "the dramatic illusion." Cf. the "rasa" principle of ancient Indian aesthetics; also S. Langer's "semblance" in Feeling and Form.

-- Burnet M. Hobgood
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